

Sunday School LESSON



A Leader Appears

The history of Israel is that of a people in frequent need of "recharging." Through the period of the judges, Israel was faithful during the time of a faithful judge; then they lapsed into idolatry until another leader came along to recharge their faithfulness. The same pattern continued through the monarchy-faithful kings led the people to be faithful; unfaithful kings led the people closer and closer to disaster. Finally disaster came, in 722 B.C. for the northern tribes and in 586 for the south. God's chosen people had become exiles in foreign lands.

After the exile, a similar pattern developed. The people who first returned to Jerusalem enthusiastically began to build the temple. But they soon lost their zeal, and the temple lay partially built until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah recharged their batteries and got the project back on track. Twenty years after it had been started, the temple was completed, and the people celebrated enthusiastically.

Then, again, the batteries grew weak. The people began to ignore the law. Some of them had even married pagan wives, and their faithfulness to Yahweh was growing weak. That's when Ezra arrived to recharge the batteries once more, as we saw in last week's lesson. Today's lesson brings us to a time about 13 years after Ezra came to Jerusalem, and the people are in need of a recharge once again.

When we first meet Nehemiah, he is serving as cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes, in the capital city of Susa. The cupbearer's job was to taste any wine brought before the king. Thus, if an assassin wished to poison the king, the poison would have to be added after the cupbearer had tasted the wine. The cupbearer, then, had to be someone the king trusted and regarded very highly. It appears that Nehemiah had become a good friend to the king as well.

It also seems that Nehemiah was quite happy with his position. He did not return with the Jews who first went back to Jerusalem or with the seventeen hundred who returned later with Ezra. Apparently he assumed that the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem could get along without him and had likely restored Jerusalem into a respectable city once more.

Then Nehemiah's and some other men came from Jerusalem with disturbing news. The holy city of Jerusalem was not a city at all. It was closer to a frontier village. The walls and gates were in ruins, just as Nebuchadnezzar's men had left them more than a hundred years before. Nehemiah sat down and cried, and then he prayed. His parents probably had taught him to love Jerusalem, the city where their ancestors had lived and died. Now its once beautiful walls were only heaps of rubble. Nehemiah could not bear the thought. Something had to be done!

Nehemiah did not act impulsively. He must have thought and planned and prayed for a long time. In fact, four months passed - from the month Kislev to Nisan - before he took his problem to the king. As Nehemiah was serving the king his wine, the king noticed the sad expression on his face. Nehemiah had never appeared unhappy in the king's presence before, so the king asked him why he was so upset. Nehemiah explained that he was mourning for his homeland.

In those days, one did not ask kings for favors so easily as people in Western countries make demands of their elected officials. The proper protocol was to wait until the king said it was okay to ask. Artaxerxes could tell Nehemiah wanted something, so he invited him to make his request.

Robertson's comments deemed offensive

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Muslim leaders are demanding an apology from Christian evangelist Pat Robertson for saying on his television program that converting to Islam "is nothing short of insanity."

The remarks, according to a transcript provided by the

Council on American-Islamic Relations, were made after a report about the persecution of Christians in some Middle East countries.

"To see Americans become followers of, quote, Islam, is nothing short of insanity," the group quoted Robertson as saying. "The Islamic people, the Arabs, were

the ones who captured Africans, put them in slavery, and sent them to America as slaves. Why would people in America want to embrace the religion of the slavers?"

The comments were made Oct. 27 on Robertson's "700 Club," which airs on his Christian Broadcasting Network, based in

Virginia Beach.

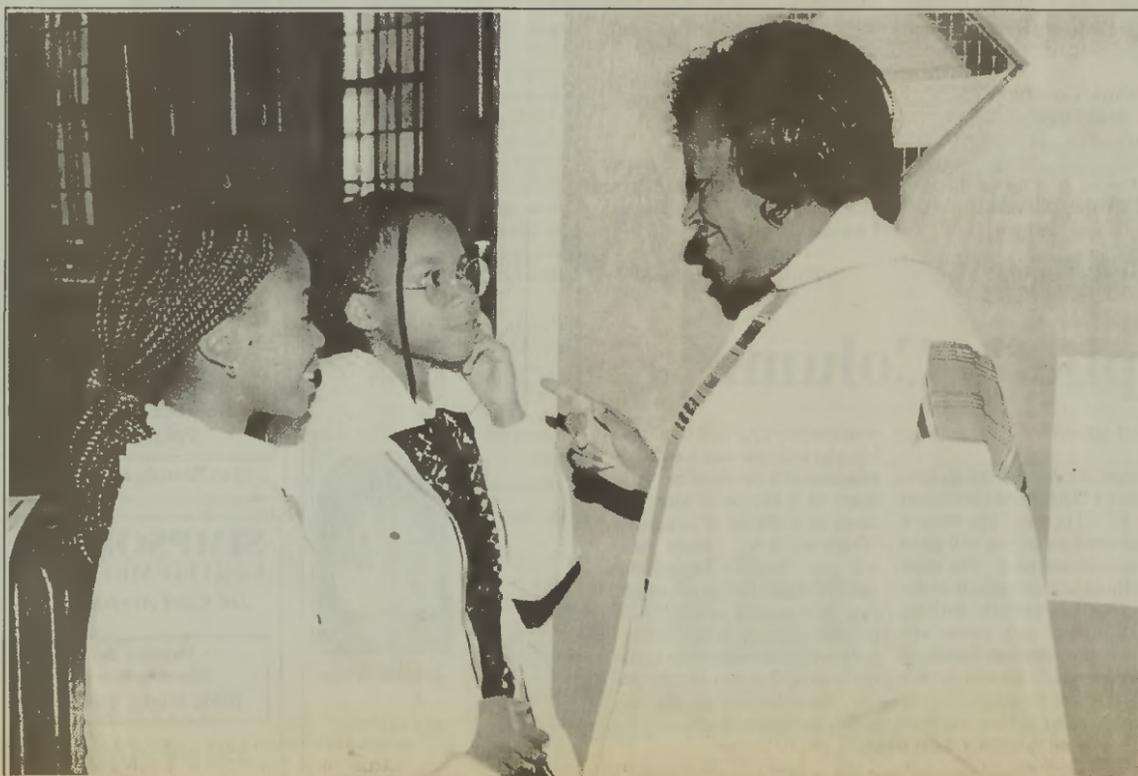
"Mr. Robertson's hate-filled remarks fit a pattern of demonization of Islam and Muslims we see growing in strength in this country," Nihad Awad, executive director of the council, said Friday at a news conference. He said Robertson had "insulted" U.S. Muslims and had previously

expressed anti-Muslim prejudice.

A spokeswoman for Robertson, said in a statement that his words "were taken out of context and unfairly misrepresented his views."

American Muslim Council leader Fahhim Abdulhadi demanded an apology.

Father Mom



The Rev. Ida Johnson greets young parishioners before service.

PHOTO/SUE ANN JOHNSON

Priest balances family, church

By Jeri Young THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Rev. Ida Louise Johnson knows about making history.

In the two years since her ordination, she's done it so many times it no longer fazes her.

She was the first African American voted student body president of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

She's the only African American woman Episcopal priest in North Carolina.

Johnson, 49, has been named vicar of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal, the city's oldest African American Episcopal congregation. She's the first woman to hold the position in the church's 112-year history. Installation services will be held Nov. 21 at 7 p.m.

She says being first is just "part of my journey."

"I kind of tend to do that," Johnson said. "It seems kind of strange to be talking about firsts this close to the year 2000. I guess we sometimes move a little slow."

Being first has its drawbacks, Johnson says.

In the Episcopal Church, priests are called father by congregants. That occasionally gives parishioners pause when talking about a woman priest.

"I am not father," she said

with a laugh. "I am not mother either. My son says I should get a tag for my car that says 'Father Mom.' I guess that might solve the problem."

Johnson encourages people just to call her "Rev. Ida."

Johnson is St. Michael's first full-time priest since 1993. In addition to ministering souls, she is also charged with the task of rebuilding. Once one of Charlotte's largest and strongest African American churches, St. Michael has had a tough time in recent years.

Forced to move its downtown home in 1968 during urban renewal, St. Michael shared worship space with other congregations for almost 15 years before finding its current sanctuary in the Brookvale community in west Charlotte. The church also lost its status as an independent congregation, which meant for years it had no full-time priest. The combination took its toll. Members left for more settled congregations.

Currently, St. Michael has 150 members. About half attend services each Sunday.

Johnson thinks she and St. Michael are a perfect match. Like the church, she has endured some tough times.

"I was a battered wife," she said. "(She and son Craig, now 22) left with only the clothes on

our backs, our Bibles and our prayer books. Leaving was a learning experience. I learned that it is OK to put your trust in God. It's not going to be nice and easy, but it is going to be OK."

In 1983, Johnson left her husband. She and her Craig settled in northern California and rebuilt their lives. Johnson followed her calling to become a priest.

"I always knew I had a mission," she said. "But women weren't allowed to begin the ordination process until 1975 or so. By that point I was married. I hadn't ever really thought about women being ordained in the church... My life was such that I was just concentrating on surviving. I had to get my life in order first. When I got to California, I realized that what I needed to be doing was not in the secular world."

Johnson returned to college after a 20-year hiatus in 1985, earning a bachelor in philosophy and religion from San Francisco State University in

1991. She went on to obtain a master of divinity from CDSP in 1994.

After spending a year as a deacon, Johnson was ordained a priest in 1995.

She spent much of her first year in the priesthood working with young people in missions in California. She served briefly as Director of Youth, Christian Education and Camps and Conferences for the Diocese of Massachusetts, the largest Episcopal diocese in the nation. She also served for a year as UNC Charlotte's Episcopal chaplain.

Coming to Charlotte wasn't in her plan, but evidently it was "part of God's," she said.

"I just wanted to take a vacation from the snow in Boston," she said, then laughed. "I never intended to stay here. I just didn't want to see snow."

After 22 snow storms in a year, Johnson decided to visit the South for Easter in 1995. She picked North Carolina because her son's godmother, who happened to be a member of St. Michael, lived here.

"She called to tell me they didn't have a supply priest for Easter," Johnson said. "I packed my vestments and came."

She's been her ever since. After almost a year and half as the

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Johnson

Report: Lyons had secret bank account

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - More than \$1 million intended for the nation's largest black church wound up in a secret bank account used by the church leader and a worker to buy a waterfront house and a diamond ring, a newspaper reported.

The Wisconsin account at the Guaranty Bank under the name J.H. Associates was opened by Josephine Hicks, who owns a Milwaukee diner and is a long-time friend of the church worker,

Bernice Edwards, the St. Petersburg Times said Thursday.

Hicks said last week that she opened the account to help Edwards cash checks but closed it after learning large wire transfers were going into the account.

Hicks said the transfers made her uncomfortable. The account was empty when she closed it more than a year ago, she said.

The newspaper reported that \$136,000 was withdrawn from the account as a down payment on a \$700,000 waterfront home that the Rev. Henry Lyons and

Edwards own together and \$28,700 went toward a diamond ring they bought.

Lyons hired Edwards, a convicted embezzler, for a top job at the National Baptist Convention USA Inc. in public relations. Lyons denied he has done anything illegal.



Lyons

The newspaper said hundreds of thousands of dollars also were transferred from the Wisconsin account into a convention Baptist Builder Fund, a secret account Lyons controlled in a St. Petersburg bank.

The Loewen Group, a funeral group in business with the convention, wired more than \$1 million into that account, the Times said. Company officials would not discuss the transaction or disclose who gave them the account number.

Workshop pairs HIV and music

By Jeri Young THE CHARLOTTE POST

A local AIDS education group is taking its message about prevention and awareness to young people through a medium sure to get their attention - song.

Revival of the African American Faith Community for the Healing of AIDS and the The North Carolina Intercollegiate Music Conference will join forces to present a weekend of awareness and song for youth.

Guest lecturers include AIDS activist the Rev. Gwen Curry, chair of RAAFC, Donald Lawrence of the Tri-City Singers and Richard Odom of Salem Baptist Church.

More than 20 colleges and high school choirs will participate in the two-day conference, which includes live recording sessions and concerts. Admissions counselors from 25 N.C. schools will be on hand to discuss financial aid options and requirements.

AIDS educators will be available to discuss HIV and AIDS.

The event is free and open to college and high students.

Schedule of events:

Friday
High School Gospel Choir Showcase, 7 p.m. Silver Mount Baptist Church, 501 W. Arrowood Road.

Saturday
Recording session and worship service, 8 p.m. Sheraton Plaza Hotel, Billy Graham Parkway.
For more information, call 393-2005.

Speaker knows pain of loss

By Jeri Young THE CHARLOTTE POST

A nationally-known speaker will help Charlotte's first African Methodist Episcopal church celebrate its 100th anniversary.

The Rev. Lonise Bias will be the keynote speaker for Greater Bethel AME's Centennial Banquet Friday.

Bias is the mother of former college basketball standout Len Bias, who was the first player chosen in the 1986 National Basketball Association draft. Bias, a star from the University of Maryland, died of cocaine overdose before playing an NBA game.

In 1990, tragedy struck the Bias family again when her younger son, Jay, was killed in a drive-by shooting.

Since the deaths of her sons, Bias has crisscrossed the country speaking to students and sports figures about the importance of remaining drug-free and avoiding the violence that plagues many communities.

Bias' speech is one of several events celebrating Greater Bethel's centennial. Previously, the church hosted a fashion show, men's day observance as well as a play tracing the church's history.

Tickets for the banquet are \$30. The event will be held at Charlotte Marriott Executive Park. For more information call 376-4345.